

Using a virtual learning environment as a research tool: online focus groups in WebCT

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What is an online focus group?

“a selected group of individuals who have volunteered to participate in a moderated, structured, online discussion in order to explore a particular topic for the purpose of research” [1]

Advantages of online focus groups

- Access to global sample including those who are typically difficult to reach e.g. housebound and busy professionals.

Improved quality of data gathered due to:

- The written, asynchronous nature of the groups;
- Physical distance between researcher and participants;
- Anonymity.

Challenges of online focus groups

- IT Skills and access to internet;
- Authenticity;
- Ethics [2].



Case studies

Exploring the experience of anorexia nervosa

Sarah Williams (Psychology)

- A completely Internet based phenomenological study with participants at varying stages of anorexia;
- Three online focus groups of 12, 4 and 10 participants – each lasting 4 – 5 weeks;
- Focus groups were supplemented with e-interviews.

Occupational therapists' perceptions of preterm children's academic difficulties in the early years of mainstream schooling

Maria Giatsi-Clausen (Occupational Therapy)

- A mixed methodology underpinned by philosophical principles of pragmatism;
- A qualitative part of the study employed asynchronous online focus groups to further explore the findings of a nation-wide survey;
- Two online focus groups of 6 and 7 participants respectively – each lasting 4 weeks.



Using a virtual learning environment (WebCT) to facilitate online focus groups

WebCT has been used successfully to collect research data [3][4][5]:

- WebCT can provide a secure, confidential, safe online research environment through:
 - Institutional policies;
 - Password protected area;
 - Enforcement of ground rules: 'netetiquette'.
- WebCT can offer the research a distinctive, user-friendly, customisable environment;
- Institutional support available for WebCT can be called upon by the participants and researcher.

Issues when using WebCT

- Ownership of WebCT:
 - Who has access?
 - What happens if there is a Freedom of Information request?
 - How much support is really available and when?
- Accessibility :
 - How compliant is WebCT for those who have a visual impairment?

Back pain sufferers' experiences and perceptions of self help for pain management

Ann Robertson (Health Psychology)

- An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) investigated self help in back pain;
- This qualitative study complemented a randomised controlled trial of a self help intervention for early back pain;
- Pilot online focus group with 3 participants lasting 2 weeks.

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[3] Dickerson S. S. & Feitshans L. A. (2003). Internet users becoming immersed in the virtual world: implications for nurses. *CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing*, 21(6), 300-308.

[4] Kenny, A. J. (2005). Interaction in cyberspace: An online focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 49(4), 414-422.

[5] Turney, L. & Pocknee, C. (2005). Virtual focus groups: New frontiers in research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4(2), 1-10.